

## **Red Grouper Questions and Answers -**

### **Q. What species of grouper are managed in the Gulf of Mexico?**

- A. The Gulf Council regulates the harvest of 15 species of grouper. The shallow-water grouper complex comprises red, gag, black, scamp, yellowfin, yellowmouth, rock hind, and red hind grouper. The deep-water grouper complex comprises snowy, yellowedge, speckled hind, warsaw, and misty grouper. The Council also prohibits the harvest of Nassau and goliath grouper.

### **Q. What federal regulations currently apply to the recreational grouper fishery?**

- A. Recreational regulations include a two red grouper bag limit, a five grouper aggregate bag limit, and minimum size limits. The harvest of Nassau grouper and goliath grouper is prohibited and a maximum of one speckled hind and one warsaw grouper may be possessed per vessel. A summary of recreational regulations can be found at: [www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org).

### **Q. What federal regulations currently apply to the commercial grouper fishery?**

- A. Commercial regulations include an 8.8 million pound (MP) gutted weight quota for shallow-water grouper, a 5.31 MP gutted weight quota for red grouper, and a 1.02 MP quota for deep-water grouper. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) closes the deep-water grouper fishery once the quota is met. The shallow-water and red grouper fisheries are closed when either the red grouper or shallow-water grouper quota are met. Size limits, commercial trip limits, various gear restrictions, and a commercial closure for gag, red grouper and black grouper from February 15 – March 15 each year are also used to regulate commercial harvest. Commercial trip limits may be reduced during the year once 50 and 75 percent of the total quota has been reached. A summary of commercial regulations can be found at: [www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org).

### **Q. What is the status of red grouper and gag stocks in the Gulf?**

- A. The Gulf stock of red grouper was declared to be overfished and undergoing overfishing by the NMFS in October 2000. A 2002 stock assessment by the NMFS found the stock condition had improved and was no longer overfished. However, the stock had yet to reach a biomass level capable of producing maximum sustainable yield (MSY) on a continuing basis. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires management actions be taken to end overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks to MSY.

The Gulf stock of gag is not overfished or undergoing overfishing based on the results of the most recent stock assessment. However, gag are considered to be fully utilized.

### **Q. What was the purpose of Secretarial Amendment 1 to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan and when were regulations implemented?**

- A. The purpose of Secretarial Amendment 1 was to eliminate overfishing and rebuild the red grouper stock. Secretarial Amendment 1 was implemented on July 15, 2004. The amendment established a 10-year rebuilding plan for red grouper, a commercial red grouper quota (5.31 MP gutted weight), and a two red grouper bag limit. The amendment also defined biological reference points and stock status determination criteria for red grouper, established a commercial tilefish quota, and reduced the commercial shallow-water grouper quota in order to lessen the impacts on other grouper species. The rebuilding plan seeks to achieve a 9.4-percent reduction in the recreational and commercial harvest of red grouper, relative to the average harvest for 1999-2001, during the first three years (2003-2005) of the 10-year rebuilding plan.

**Q. What is the Allowable Biological Catch (ABC) for red grouper during the first three years of the rebuilding plan and how is the ABC allocated?**

- A. The initial red grouper ABC for commercial and recreational red grouper harvest is 6.56 MP annually during the first three years (2003-2005) of the rebuilding plan. The ABC is allocated among the commercial and recreational sector based on historical landings during 1999 through 2001. The allowable commercial harvest is 5.31 MP (81 percent of ABC) and the allowable recreational harvest is 1.25 MP (19 percent of ABC).

**Q. Will the Allowable Biological Catch be increased in 2006?**

- A. Currently the Gulf Council is not considering increasing the red grouper ABC in 2006 because target catches were exceeding during the first three years of the rebuilding plan.

**Q. Why is NMFS not considering reallocating recreational and commercial landings?**

- A. The Council is responsible for decisions about fishery allocation. The Council can consider reallocating fishery landings in the future through the development of a full plan amendment, which would include opportunity for public comment.

**Q. Why is NMFS considering interim regulations for red grouper?**

- A. Red grouper landings in both 2003 and 2004 exceeded the 1.25 MP recreational allocation established in Secretarial Amendment 1. Landings in 2003 were only slightly greater than the allocation and totaled 1.35 MP. In 2004, recreational landings totaled 3.10 MP. During the March 7-10, 2005, Council meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, the Council reviewed red grouper landings and requested NMFS implement an interim rule to reduce 2005 recreational red grouper landings.

**Q. How are recreational landings estimated?**

- A. Recreational landings for charter vessels and private anglers are estimated by the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS). A summary of the methods used by the MRFS to estimate landings can be found at: [www.st.nmfs.gov/st1/recreational/index.html](http://www.st.nmfs.gov/st1/recreational/index.html). Harvests from the for-hire headboat sector are obtained through a survey by the Southeast

Fishery Science Center's Headboat Survey. Headboat captains are required to fill out logbooks for each trip; data include date of trip, duration of trip, number of passengers, area fished and harvest by species.

**Q. Have 2004 red grouper MRFSS landings been reviewed?**

Red grouper landings were reviewed by MRFSS staff, as well as during a constituent review meeting held earlier this year in Silver Spring, Maryland. Landings estimates had relatively low proportional standard errors suggesting precise, reliable estimates. Several minor corrections were made to the intercept data before final landings estimates were estimated.

**Q. How can 2004 red grouper MRFSS landings be so high considering Florida sustained four hurricanes?**

Red grouper landings during January through June, prior to the first Florida hurricane, were already in excess of the recreational allocation and totaled 1.58 MP. The total number of angler trips was up only slightly in 2004 (<10%), indicating angler effort was not likely responsible for the large increase in landings. Examination of catch estimates indicated the percentage of trips harvesting red grouper and the average number of trips landing red grouper were higher than the previous year in wave 1 (January-February), wave 2 (March-April), wave 3 (May-June), wave 4 (July-August), and wave 5 (September-October), and similar in wave 6 (November – December).

Examination of effort data indicated the storms impacted local areas of fishing. For example, a review of MRFSS data for west coast Florida charters (SW FL to Big Bend area) supports that fishing activity to federal waters was limited following Hurricane Charley in August. But due to the extent of the region and the rapid movement of only a few days for this storm, the overall activity level for the entire two-month (August – September) wave was not severely reduced.

**Q. Why are regulations for the commercial red grouper fishery not being considered?**

- A. Commercial landings during 2003 and 2004 were less than the commercial quotas for red grouper and shallow-water grouper. In 2004, NMFS closed the shallow-water grouper fishery on November 15, 2004, to prevent the commercial quota from being exceeded. In March 2005, commercial trip limits were implemented through emergency rule to slow the rate of commercial grouper harvest. Size limits, commercial trip limits, various gear restrictions, and a commercial closure for gag, red grouper and black grouper from February 15–March 15 each year are also used to regulate commercial harvest.

**Q. How long would the interim regulations be effective?**

- A. Interim regulations would be effective for 180 days, unless extended by one additional period for no more than 180 days. The Secretary of Commerce may terminate an interim regulation at an earlier date if the Council concurs.

**Q. How much of a reduction in red grouper landings is needed for 2005?**

- A. Based on average landings during 2003 and 2004, it is estimated that as much as a 43.8 percent reduction in recreational red grouper landings is needed to end overfishing in 2005. Lesser or greater reductions in landings could be needed depending on actual 2005 landings, and are being considered for the interim rule. NMFS is taking into account preliminary 2005 landings data, which indicate red grouper landings for January-February 2005 are lower than landings during similar months in 2003 and 2004.

**Q. What regulations are being considered for the interim rule?**

- A. The interim rule will consider a range of alternatives, including reductions to the red grouper bag limit (two to one fish), reductions to the aggregate grouper bag limit (five to either four, three, or two fish), red grouper size limits (22 or 23 inches), closed seasons for all grouper (two, three, and four month closures during July-December 2005), and various combinations of these alternatives.

**Q. Will the interim regulations consider economic impacts?**

- A. The National Marine Fisheries Service is currently preparing an Environmental Assessment, which will evaluate the biological, social, economic, and administrative effects of the interim regulations. Economic analyses, including a Regulatory Impact Review, will evaluate the effects of each of the proposed alternatives on consumer surplus (what consumers are willing to pay for a unit of the good versus what consumers actually do pay for the product) and angler expenditures, as well as the number of trips affected by each of the alternatives.

**Q. Why are some alternatives considering regulations for all groupers and not just red grouper?**

- A. Red grouper are part of a multispecies fishery that includes gag, other groupers, and snappers. Interim regulations are being considered for all groupers to reduce bycatch and discard mortality of red grouper and to minimize impacts on gag and other groupers, resulting from shifts in effort from additional red grouper restrictions.

**Q. Will public hearings be held to discuss interim regulations?**

- A. Yes, public hearings will be held in mid-to-late June throughout the Gulf of Mexico to solicit public comments regarding interim regulations for red grouper and other groupers. For a list of public hearing locations and times visit the Gulf Council's website at:  
[www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org)